

## Series: MICE will rejuvenate Japan

### Part 5

# Japan's Strengths and its Unique, Abundant Appeal as a MICE Destination

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Although the number of foreign visitors to Japan each year has not yet reached the 10 million mark, Japan's attractions as a tourist destination are propelling the country up the international travel charts as people around the world become more aware of Japanese pop culture, lifestyles and attentive service.

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#### Popular Japan

Results of the Visa Global Travel Intentions Survey 2011 published in September this year reveal that Japan is one of respondents' top three most likely global holiday destinations in the next two years, after the United States and the United Kingdom. Japan was very popular among Asians, ranked first by respondents from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand, and second by Chinese. Moreover, Japan was named "favourite long-haul country" in the Guardian Travel Awards 2011 announced in October, with a satisfaction rating of 98.9%. In the "favourite overseas city" category, Tokyo beat Sydney into first place with a 98.2% satisfaction rating. Both the Visa survey and the Guardian awards took place after the March earthquake.

Thus Japan is rated as a highly attractive destination in terms of both travel intentions and post-visit satisfaction, and is attracting greater interest.

#### The MICE Industry

Turning to MICE activity, according to UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry, Japan ranks second in Asia for trade fair revenues, with a 22.4% share, while China is first (34.1%) and Hong Kong third (10.8%). Although Japan ranks much lower in terms of exhibition space sold, it is making strenuous efforts to improve the situation. Union of International Associations (UIA) figures for the number of international conferences held in 2010 placed Japan second behind the United States. Singapore ranked third and Korea eighth. By city, however, Singapore was placed first and Seoul fifth, while Tokyo was down at seventh. Japan remains competitive as an event venue even

as bigger and more complex facilities are becoming available throughout Asia, but other Asian nations are starting to catch up.

In 2009 and 2010 the Japan Tourism Agency (JTA) conducted a survey on overseas recognition of Japan's MICE brand, which strikingly showed that respondents including members of the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) more often cited Asia as an outstanding MICE location than Europe or America. However, Japan ranked seventh among Asian countries, after Australia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia and China.

#### Japan's Appeal as a MICE Destination

As bigger, more complex MICE facilities become available throughout Asia, how can Japan maintain its position as a

#### UIA International Conference Statistics (2010) By Country

	Country	No. of Conferences
1	United States	936
2	Japan	741
3	Singapore	725
4	France	686
5	Belgium	597
6	Spain	572
7	Germany	499
8	Korea	464
9	United Kingdom	375
10	Australia	362

#### By City

	Country	No. of Conferences
1	Singapore	725
2	Brussels	486
3	Paris	394
4	Vienna	257
5	Seoul	201
6	Barcelona	193
7	Tokyo	190
8	Geneva	189
9	Madrid	175
10	Berlin	165

preferred host country, given its lack of ultra-large venues?

A particular feature of the Japanese market is that international conferences have always been spread around the regions, rather than concentrated solely in Tokyo (Tokyo accounts for only 23% of all international events held in Japan, and just 12% of participants). By contrast, events in many other Asian countries are focused on capitals or other major cities. Japan's regions are a major attraction, and in aggregate they can be regarded as making Japan the number two host nation in the world and number one in Asia.

The JTA MICE brand survey mentioned above revealed that cultural and historical assets were even more crucial than the quality of facilities, with respondents ranking Japan's attractions as a MICE destination in the following order: (1) Chance to experience Japan's traditional culture, (2) Quality of service provided by venues and hotels, (3) Cultural facilities and heritage, (4) Well-equipped MICE facilities. These factors are a perfect fit with regional appeal and diversity.

Japan has three key attractions as a MICE destination. The first is safety (although some negativity remains surrounding the nuclear accident, Japan is said to be the only country in the world where Asian women feel safe travelling alone). The second is ease of access by air from many countries. And the third is an abundance of high-quality hotels offering good service.

Other attractions include unique traditions and a vibrant pop culture, a beautiful natural environment and stunning scenery, more affordable prices than in the past (although the yen is strong at present), the chance for uniquely Japanese experiences such as visits to hot springs and other health facilities, trying ikebana, putting on kimono, staying in traditional inns with tatami mats and futons, and attending taiko drum performances, not to mention delicious food products and cuisine, and cities packed with cutting-edge technology. Japan's regions offer a host of attractions, with the Michelin Green Guide Japan listing almost 900 sites at one star or more, with nearly 60 meriting the three stars that indicate they are worth a special journey. It is no exaggeration to say that this represents a wealth of attractions compared to other countries.

## Need for Information

Those involved in the MICE industry overseas often say that Japan is not good at communicating information on its facilities and venues. Despite a lack of ultra-large facilities, Japan has many strengths, including a wide range of medium- and large-sized conference and exhibition halls, outstandingly hospitable service backed by well-trained staff and multipurpose meeting complexes, and clean, well-maintained facilities. Although Japan's major cities and regions offer a wealth of tourist attractions, opportunities



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The new Haneda Airport international passenger terminal opened in 2010.

are wasted through poor marketing.

We Japanese live in a homogeneous society where things are often understood even if unsaid and where people tend to be reserved, so perhaps this leaves us unskilled in communicating national pride and self-publicizing. If this is the case, I am confident that bringing in foreign employees to actively publicize things we take for granted would convince the international community that Japan is a destination fully capable of ranking alongside integrated resort complexes and ultra-large facilities.

Finally, I would like to mention a small dream of my own. At the height of the bubble, inns in hot spring resorts invested heavily to meet projected demand from domestic corporate clients, and now they have large banquet halls and magnificent guest rooms. What if we were to make more use of such inns as unique venues for international MICE events for one or two hundred people? Some fashionable city restaurants have laid carpets over their tatami mats and installed tables and chairs; couldn't banquet halls in hot spring resorts adopt a similar style while accommodating guests in traditional inns? Perhaps some people would feel strange taking their shoes off to attend a meeting, but there is no doubt that it would provide a unique experience. Perhaps our regional hot spring resorts will become talked about all over the world.

## - MICE Research Institute - Major Activities



- ① Planning and consulting services for domestic and international conferences and exhibitions
- ② Promotion of private finance initiatives (PFI) and public-private partnerships (PPP) (privatization of government enterprises)
- ③ Planning and research for the development of conference and cultural facilities
- ④ Research of MICE projects overseas
- ⑤ Publicity and publishing related to MICE